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"Say it, Mother!" : an ethnography of an African American Pentecostal church

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"Say it, Mother!": An ethnography of an
African American Pentecostal church

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by

Balmurli Natrajan

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PREFACE

Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that you mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

-- Holy Bible
Exodus 3:10

Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reaction. Do not fear.

-- Bhagavad Gita,
Chapter 18, Text 66.

Both the above quotes enjoin complete loyalty to God. They are conveying similar meanings to very different peoples, at very different times, with very different traditions. I grew up with the latter tradition and I bring this with me into this journey, albeit only as a spectator. I set out in the summer of 1992, to meet the cultural "other," and after two months of wandering, I found my way to the doorsteps of the Church of Sweet Jesus¹. At that time, I felt a good opportunity had come my way after much hard work. Now, eight months later, as I write this thesis, I feel less egocentric. Maybe it was the musical magic to which I was unconsciously drawn, or maybe it was God who brought me to His home -- a

¹ The real name of this church has been changed in order to protect the confidentiality of the church members. This church is situated in what is usually referred to as the inner-city. The names of the informants and other church members have also been changed for the same reason.

factor that I was not eager to include earlier. The anthropologist moves between two worlds, sometimes refining his/her own views about each world, and at other times adding to the existing picture yet another perspective born from human experience. This then is the spirit in which I did my fieldwork, and subsequently this writing.

This is a story about a small group of individuals and their struggle to continue experiencing in their daily lives the most intimate truths revealed to them. The "Mother Church," as it is lovingly known among inner city church - goers, has seen a number of changes over the last half a century. The most dramatic of these has been the drastic reduction in the congregation size. Whereas there were times, especially during the Depression years, when, according to the members, there would be no standing place in the church, now it is very common to see more than half the seats empty on a Sunday morning. Still, life goes on in the face of such changes, and the resilience of the human spirit is the protagonist in the ensuing drama.

In telling this story, I have used the narrative style of representation. Wherever necessary, I have weaved into the narrative some of my own analysis. I have found this to be personally satisfying as an alternative to presenting the people, whose story this is, as a riddle to be solved by the anthropologist with the help of scientific tools of

investigation and explanation. It was Chekov who said to an aspiring writer that if he wanted to represent the moon, he should not describe it in the sky, but rather let us see its reflection in a broken bit of glass at our feet (Doctorow 1990:xii). I have therefore tried to convey, as far as possible, the dynamics of the daily lives of the people at the church, for "the truth...lies in the feeling [of the culture], and not in defining its factors" (Womack 1967:x).

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"One can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else. One can stay, as I have here, within a single, more or less bounded form, and circle steadily within it....But whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them" (Geertz 1973:453).

Statement of the problem

This is an ethnography of the Church of Sweet Jesus, a predominantly African American church congregation, situated in a midwestern city. The locus of this study is the weekly Sunday morning service held at that church. This three to five hour long regular event, is a crucial cultural form of this community. It is in this event that many of the most intensely held cultural values and beliefs get played out in public. Members seem to build their daily lives around this weekly event. As I have become more and more involved with the community, I have been able to understand them better. I have tried to build this ethnography around this event. In doing so, I weave this cultural form into its larger context -- the cultural world of the church members. Through this endeavor I have sought to capture the points of view of the church

members themselves, how they view this event, what it means to them and finally how they define their own selves. This then is hopefully in keeping with the spirit of the opening quote.

At the outset, I must clarify what this study is not. It is not a socio-psychological explanation for the activities of the church members. I have not searched for correlations between various factors that may be affecting their lives. It is, rather, an attempt to make clear to the outsider, what the actions of the church members mean to themselves. It is thus an effort in cultural interpretation. As Paul Rabinow so eloquently speaks about the art of interpretation, "...the aim is not to uncover universals or laws but rather to explicate content and world" (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987:14). Thus I have not asked the question, "Why are they doing what they are doing?" Rather, I have assumed that they do what they do because they find meaning in it, and consequently I have asked the question, "What does all this mean to you?"

Overview of the thesis

The organization of this thesis reflects this approach. The second chapter discusses the extant literature on Black Pentecostalism in the U.S.A. A brief delineation of my own theoretical orientations in doing anthropology, is also included here. The next chapter discusses the approach that I have used for doing fieldwork. Here I describe how I selected

the group, how I established rapport, the role that I played within the group, and the method of collecting information. I then move on to the locus of the study -- a description of what happens every Sunday at the church. In describing this event, I introduce various cultural performances such as singing, testifying, praying, announcing and preaching. The following chapter then attempts to fill in the details and descriptive elaborations of what all this means to the church members themselves. It is here that I have included the social history of the church, accounts of their personal transformation in the church and what all this means to them. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about how such a study contributes to social research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Church of Sweet Jesus belongs to the international denomination -- Church of God in Christ. This church is one of the seven denominations that are referred to in scholarly literature as "historically Black denominations" (see Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Of these seven denominations, the Church of God in Christ is the only Pentecostal one. The others are Baptists and Methodists. A quick look at the statistics which constitute the membership of each of these seven churches gives us a reasonable idea of their relative strengths. The three Black Baptist churches together account for about 12 million members, the three Black Methodists account for about 6 million members and the Church of God in Christ accounts for 3.5 million members (Ibid). The Church of God in Christ is thus the smallest of the seven historically Black churches. But it is one of the fastest growing churches within the Black community in the U.S.A. It is outside the scope of this thesis to trace the history of Pentecostalism from its humble beginnings in the Azusa Street Revival held in Los Angeles from 1906 to 1909, up to the present when it has grown to become an international phenomenon. I will rather concentrate on the various ways in which this phenomenon has been dealt

with in the scholarly literature on Black religion in general and Pentecostalism in particular.

There are two broad approaches that have been used for studies on Pentecostalism. One is the functionalist approach and the other is what may be called the interpretive approach. In reviewing the literature encompassing these two approaches, I have also delineated my own choice for a theoretical orientation. All through the literature on Pentecostalism, I have found many dialectical tensions existing. I have focussed on one of these tensions -- the other-worldliness verses the this-worldliness of the Pentecostals¹. My justification for the particular approach that I have used in writing this ethnography, mainly rests on the argument that the interpretive approach is able to achieve an insider's perspective which has eluded the grasp of the functionalist approach. This difference in approach has effectively shaped the outcome of the respective studies. Whereas the functionalist studies have traditionally tended to view the Pentecostals as predominantly other worldly, the interpretive studies have tended to view them in their actual complexity as varying combinations of each of these two extremes -- many

¹ For a succinct overview of the various dialectical tensions involved in the study of the Black religious experience in the U.S.A., Lincoln and Mamiya's opening chapter on theoretical models used is very valuable (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990:10-16).

times more this-worldly than the functionalists make them out to be!

This chapter is divided into two broad sections:

1. A brief sketch of studies in Pentecostalism from the early twentieth century writings to the present period.
2. Interpretive anthropology as my theoretical approach.

Early 20th century studies on Pentecostalism

In the 1920s Ira Reid presented her study on the non-denominational churches which have traditionally been associated with the Pentecostals and the more modern movement -- the Charismatics. This was one of the earliest lay critiques of the non-mainline churches of the day. Reid's argument was that the lower classes along with the criminal classes, had taken the exact opposite direction in their religious behaviors to the "progressive" mainstream classes. The direction of the former was towards increased emotionalism and mysticism in religion, which contrasted with the more controlled and intellectualized religion of the latter (Reid 1926:278). It was not long before Reid's work was replaced by a more "scientific" version of the core ideas contained in her work. Works such as those of Anton Boison in the 30s and Eddy Norman in the 50s used the more systematic functionalist methods for research and tried to correlate economic deprivation and religious emotionalism

(Boisen 1939; Norman 1958).

At around the same time there was the "Genius of the South" -- Zora Neale Hurston who wrote very differently on black religious behavior. Her works were celebrated within the world of folklore and were not considered very "scientific." Her writings on the Sanctified Church (another name for the Church of God in Christ) remain to this day in a realm of their own (Hurston 1983). Hurston introduced the emic² element into studies on Black religions, a factor that was grossly overlooked in the dominant works of her times. She also used the narrative method with remarkable artistry and threw the first challenge to the functionalist critiques. Like many geniuses, Zora Neale Hurston's works grew in stature much after her death. Thus we see the gradual acceptance of her styles of writing within the broad academic community, only in the last two decades. But between the time of her death and these last few years, the functionalist studies were the norm for scholarly research.

Studies during the civil rights period

The 1960s and the 1970s produced a plethora of works in the field of Black religion. This was a time when many significant studies of Black religion were done by Blacks

² Emic here refers to the "native point of view," as opposed to etic which is the outsider's point of view. In contemporary literature, emic is also used to mean the subjective perspective of social reality.

themselves. A prominent one amongst these was by E. Franklin Frazier (Frazier 1964). In this study Frazier continued in the fashion of the functionalists and developed what came to be known as the "deradicalization thesis" in Black religion. According to this, as Blacks moved up the socio-economic ladder, they tended to distance themselves from the traditional Black Church and related religious practices. There were other such works too in similar vein (see Washington 1964, Lanternari 1963). These studies increasingly have been challenged in the last two decades, both by Blacks themselves as well as by other researchers of black religion in the U.S.A. At the same time the scholar C. Eric Lincoln brought to the attention of the academic world, a part of the Black religious experience that had hitherto been unrecognized. His work on the Black Muslims in America stands as an excellent model even today (Lincoln 1961). In many ways Lincoln's work was the watershed for the modern studies of Black religions due to his attempts to portray the "messier" sides of the subject. The functionalist explanations were simply not adequate to grasp the dynamics involved in Black religious behaviors. The study of Pentecostalism itself benefited from the study of West Indian Pentecostals in England, as well as other studies from Chile and Brazil, thus opening the scope of study to international spheres (Calley 1965, Harper 1963, Willems 1967).

The 1970s saw the dawn of a different kind of work on the

Pentecostals -- a major source of data for traditional functionalist theories of religion. The focus shifted from the "feelings and functions" of the church, to the "communitarian" aspects of church life. Melvin Williams's study on a Black Pentecostal church in Boston, is the exemplar of such a shift in focus. His study focusses on the distinctive quality of social relations, communal ideology, and social behavior within the group (Williams 1974:3). Nevertheless, religion for Williams was still to be viewed in its functional sense and he thus begs the question of why people fulfill their communitarian needs in a church and not in some other kind of voluntary associations. There were also other comprehensive works on the Pentecostal movement (Synan 1971; Hollenweger 1972; Spittler 1976). One of the studies conducted during this time period was a comparative study of the Pentecostal Movement and the Black Power Movement (see Gerlach and Hine 1970). This study made some contributions to viewing the Pentecostals as a social change movement and the Black Power Movement as a religious movement.

Modern studies in Pentecostalism

By this time the Pentecostals themselves were addressing some of the theories that scholars had directed at their religious behavior. Arnor Davis was one of the pioneers in this direction. He provides personal examples from his own

experience within the Sanctified Church showing how the church had been historically involved in the civil rights movement, the Poor People's Campaign and other drives to get voter registration. He also speaks about the wide range of majors chosen by the Holiness³ students at Howard University, thus vindicating his claim that they were far from being other-worldly (Davis 1972:82-87).

No review of Black religion can be complete without acknowledging the impact of James Cone. Primarily a theologian, Cone has contributed to the systematization of a uniquely Black Theology of Liberation (Cone 1969, 1970 and 1984). He has also written on the Spirituals and the Blues - two of the indigenous Black contributions to American music. In writing about this topic, Cone authoritatively asserts that Black music and its integral role in Black religion cannot be studied without "experiencing" it first hand:

I am therefore convinced that it is not possible to render an authentic interpretation of black music without having shared and participated in the experience that created it. Black music must be lived before it can be understood (Cone 1972:3).

Thus Cone attacks the conventional methods used to study Black religions and helps create a scholarly space in research for

³ The Holiness movement is the predecessor of the Pentecostal movement and has its roots in nineteenth century Methodism. Both these movements share more commonalities than differences and are therefore used here interchangeably. For a clear distinction of these two movements, see Lincoln and Mamiya 1990:77.

the narratives, participatory and emic views of religion.

In more recent times there has been a further broadening of the scope of research on Pentecostalism. The phenomenal growth of Pentecostals in the U.S.A., as well as internationally, has continued to interest researchers (Cook 1983; Miranda-Feliciano 1991; Salvatore 1990). The phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism especially in the Latin American and African contexts, finally has been noticed by the scholars of religion and the need to understand this growth has been reiterated strongly (Hollenweger 1986). One of the directions of the research within the U.S.A. is on the degree to which the Pentecostals may be considered as seekers of social change. Thus Leonard Lovett reminds us that,

It was not coincidental or accidental that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights activist, delivered his final speech (I Have A Dream) from the world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ Mason Temple. As one of the oldest Black Holiness - Pentecostal movements of Afro-American rootage, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) has historically been identified with the voiceless, downtrodden and the oppressed (Lovett 1985:389).

In the same vein, Gayraud Wilmore, another pioneer in the modern studies of Black religions, makes a point about the historical priority of Black churches:

Our churches were rescue missions and survival stations on an underground route to freedom and dignity. The theology that thundered from the pulpits on Sundays was less concerned about how to understand the first three articles of the Nicene Creed than about faith, hope and love and their relevance to obtaining the next three meals (Wilmore

1985:361).

Bobby Alexander takes up this issue from yet another angle. His is more ethnographic than historical. Concentrating on ritual possession among the Pentecostals, he frames his problem as stemming from a wrong interpretation of Victor Turner's theory of ritual -- due to which ritual is viewed as essentially conservative. According to him, this false interpretation has led the scholarly literature to largely promote the view that,

ritual possession among those Pentecostals who are socially and economically marginalized is a form of sublimation which is substituted for life-changing political and social action (Alexander 1991:26-7).

He then proceeds to effectively show how ritual possession actually acts as a vehicle of conflict and change.

Specifically, his ethnographic study of an African American Pentecostal church, shows how

the experience of *communitas* generated, supports their commitment to carry their communitarian values into their political activities and efforts toward social change....communitarian bond is more immediate and goes deeper than does the bond of socioeconomic position and race, thus providing emotional and existential support (Ibid 41).

A decade before this study, Arthur Paris tackled the same issue in his ethnographic work on a Black Pentecostal church in Boston. His main thesis was that the traditional studies of Black religions never allowed more than an epiphenomenal role for religion. His phenomenological approach is an attempt to

give "ontological" status for religion and takes the reasons given by the church members themselves for their behavior, seriously. Thus he extends the discussion of such churches in two ways -- "by invoking other categories for analysis, and by confronting directly the religious basis for their behavior" (Paris 1982:82-92).

Such studies are still however rare, and functionalist "explanations" still abound in the literature, albeit in more sophisticated ways than before (Goodman 1988, Goldsmith 1988, 1989). For example, Goodman's work views ritual associated with altered states of consciousness as solely reflective or expressive of modifications in human interactions with the habitat. She includes in her analysis, theories drawn from neurophysiology, ecology, psychology and biology (Goodman 1988).

Some of the most exciting work in this field, has come from within the Pentecostal movement in Latin America, especially Chile and Brazil. Juan Sepulveda, a Pentecostal pastor in Chile, calls for a better understanding of Pentecostalism from an inclusive perspective which seeks to incorporate the meaning which Pentecostalism holds for its followers. Thus he says that,

despite the increase in research work and studies on the matter [Pentecostalism] -- there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the significance of the Pentecostal experience. Because of this ignorance, the attitude of other churches or

communities is frequently marked by theological, cultural and political prejudices....Social scientists' opinion of Pentecostalism is shown among others in the following expressions: opium [of the masses], domination via religion, religious proclamation of social conformism, refuge of the masses (Sepulveda 1989:80-81).

This search for the meaning which Pentecostalism has for its believers is what has led some scholars to focus on what is sometimes referred to as "folk religion." Elaine Lawless' work on one group of Pentecostals in southern Indiana is an excellent example of such a kind of study. Coming from the perspective of a folklorist, Lawless concentrates on

what is being passed down from generation to generation, or from group member to member, in an informal, largely oral, manner? (Lawless 1988:4).

She classifies these elements being passed down as constituting the "traditional" part of the religion. This is then what makes a "folk church,"

A 'folk church' then, is not a folk church because its members are poor or marginal or psychologically unstable, but because the theological premises on which it stands, the order of the service, the plan of salvation, the practices and rituals performed at each service, are all established, maintained, and performed orally by the collective group involved. These churches do tend to be autonomous (Ibid:5).

Lawless' work has the effect of placing the subject at the center of the analysis of Pentecostalism. The emergence of theory from within the cultural context itself, is a prime characteristic of the interpretive approach in studying social as well as religious phenomena. The realm of religion

is then accorded a substantive basis and theories are not sought to "explain" it away as an epiphenomenon.

The study of American folk religion in this sense is still in its "embryonic stage," as Lawless ruefully states (Ibid:1). It is towards this that I wish to contribute through this study of the Church of Sweet Jesus. The body of writings which loosely fall under the rubric of interpretive anthropology has been most useful to me in this endeavor. In the following section, I have delineated some of the major characteristics of interpretive anthropology.

Interpretive anthropology

Interpretive anthropology was born as one of many responses to a "crisis" experienced in anthropology in the 1960s. This was a crisis of method. The traditional structural-functionalist methods were beginning to be increasingly questioned and alternate views of social reality were being sought (Ortner 1984; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Among the major responses to this crisis were three movements -- structuralism, cultural ecology and symbolic anthropology. Interpretive anthropology is a variant of the larger "school" of symbolic anthropology, and is associated with its pioneer and chief spokesman, Clifford Geertz. There are significant differences between this and the other dominant variant associated with Victor Turner (Ortner

1984:129).

Over the last three decades, interpretive anthropology has inspired a range of ethnographies and reflections of anthropological activities. It has had the general effect of radicalizing anthropology to become more self-critical. Interpretive anthropology should further be viewed as a systematization of the doctrine of cultural relativism, which has also been traditionally associated with liberalist politics in the U.S.A. Thus viewed, interpretive anthropology is the theoretical heir to the doctrine of cultural relativism and ethnography is its practical embodiment (see Marcus and Fischer 1986:32).

"Interpretive anthropology is a covering label for a diverse set of reflections upon both the practice of ethnography and the concept of culture" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:25). It does not claim the status of an alternative paradigm. In fact one of its defining themes is the admission of the impossibility, nay the undesirability, of such a scheme as "A General Theory of Culture" (Geertz 1973:26). It is this theme in particular that has attracted me to interpretive anthropology as possibly the most cogent articulation of many of my own thoughts about culture and society. Let us then turn to the contributions of this vision, for interpretive anthropology does not deserve to be pigeonholed into being a school or paradigm or a theory. It is a vision of what

anthropology should focus upon and how anthropologists could create their methods from this platform.

Basic premises and goals

The interpretive turn refocusses attention on the concrete varieties of cultural meaning, in their particularity and complex texture, but without falling into the traps of historicism or cultural relativism in their classic forms (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987:5-6).

The most defining characteristic and also the foundational premise of interpretive anthropology, is the shifting of focus from behavior and social structure to,

meaning, symbols, and language, and to a renewed recognition, central to the human sciences, that social life must fundamentally be conceived as the negotiation of meanings (Marcus and Fischer 1986:26).

Such a shift has situated the actor back as the focus of social action, much in the same way as the Romanticist movement of the nineteenth-century. The difference here though, lies in a second fundamental premise of interpretive anthropology -- that of the intersubjectivity of cultural meaning as the unit of analysis. The earlier Romanticists vehemently rejected the "objectivist" models for a social science, and instead pushed for a "subjective" human science. Interpretive anthropology rescues social research from the dilemma of subjective/objective dichotomy, by seeking social realities within the world of "shared meanings." Thus

situated, its subject or object of research, is actually intersubjective in nature and is to be found in social discourse⁴.

A third and final premise of interpretive anthropology is its insistence on the irreducibility of cultural meaning:

Interpretation begins from the postulate that the web of social meaning constitute human existence to such an extent that it cannot ever be meaningfully reduced to constitutively prior speech acts, dyadic relations, or any predefined elements (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987:6).

Interpretive anthropology further acknowledges the impossibility of grasping the whole in its entirety, but sets for itself the task of approximating it as far as possible (see Geertz 1973:29).

These premises of interpretive anthropology are the guidelines for the delineation of its goals which may be briefly stated as under:

1. To elicit the "native point of view" and to elucidate how different constructions of reality affect social action.
2. To reflect on the epistemological groundings of the above accounts (see Marcus and Fischer 1986: 25-26).

⁴ The notion of discourse is a theme that has replaced the earlier view of viewing social reality as a text for interpretation. This notion has been clearly developed in the current literature on interpretive anthropology (see Rabinow and Sullivan 1987; Gadamer 1975).

Some definitions

As has become a common phenomenon within anthropology, the concept of culture has about as many meanings as there are practitioners of anthropology. So it is with interpretive anthropology. Geertz defines culture semiotically as denoting

an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols...by means of which men [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life (Geertz 1966:3).

This definition of what culture is should not be superficially read as being of a "mentalist" tone. Culture is to be distinguished from both, behavior as well as social institutions or traditions. As Geertz puts it,

Culture, this acted document, thus is public...Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity (Geertz 1973:10).

Therefore, culture is public and it gets expressed through symbols which may be defined as:

any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception -- the conception is the symbol's 'meaning' (Geertz 1966:5).

The beauty as well as utility of such a semiotic definition of culture is that it gives culture

a relatively fixed locus, and a degree of objectivity, that it did not have before. The focus on symbols was for Geertz and many others

heuristically⁵ liberating: it told them where to find what they wanted to study (Ortner 1984:129).

Major concepts and method

Following Geertz's above definition of culture, we next turn to some of the major concepts which form the basis of the interpretive argument. Geertz assigns the task of "cultural interpreter" to the anthropologist rather than behavioral scientist or any other related term. Using the metaphor of dialogue,

the anthropologist...chooses anything in a culture that strikes his attention and then fills in detail and descriptive elaboration so as to inform readers in his own culture about meanings in the culture being described (Marcus and Fischer 1986:27).

In order to achieve this objective, the anthropologist has to attempt a "thick description" of the particular focus of his/her study. Thick description is a notion which Geertz borrows from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle and astutely applies it to the anthropological enterprise. Geertz speaks about "piled-up structures of signification," not unlike Weber's "webs of signification which we ourselves have spun." Thick description then tries to "peel off these layers of

⁵ In a paper for a class, I had received a comment from the professor that Geertz's concepts were "merely an interesting heuristic device." My response to the term heuristic here is that the argument for interpretive anthropology is based on a foundation which asserts that social reality cannot be objectively deduced. It has to be heuristically understood in all its intersubjectivity.

significance" and reach an intersubjective understanding of social action seen as symbolic action (Geertz 1973:3-30). It is also important to remember that in order to do this, the anthropologist has to situate the phenomenon in question within the broader context of the cultural and political processes affecting it. As a powerful exemplar, Geertz attempts to bring out the meaning of the Balinese cockfight in its entirety by building around it the cultural structures of signification that the Balinese have constructed -- their ethos, their world-view, and their symbols (Ibid:412-453).

This brings us to two other major concepts - world-view and ethos. According to Geertz, ethos is the tone, character, and quality of the life of a people, its moral and aesthetic style and mood, whereas, their world-view is the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (see Geertz 1958). Although it is not advisable to sharply distinguish the two concepts, the task of interpretive anthropology has been more biased toward the ethos side of culture than the world-view. This is also the "messier" side of social action wherein the anthropologist is engaged in second and third order interpretations⁶, while

⁶ That cultural meaning is itself a first-order interpretation is a foundation of interpretive anthropology. But the task of the anthropologist enters a second-order interpretive stage while doing fieldwork, and enters the third-order stage while writing ethnographies, or "incubating" the meanings.

attempting to evoke a sense of the "cultural other."

There are two other major concepts that Geertz has developed to facilitate the task of the interpretive anthropologist. These are the dyadic pair of experience-near and experience-distant, and the concept of juxtaposition of these two. The pair experience-near and experience-distant, has been borrowed from the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, and Geertz uses them as an improvement on the earlier related anthropological concepts of emic and etic, or insider and outsider viewpoints. An experience-near concept is the category or concept which is naturally used by the "native" or informant to understand his/her cultural experience. In contrast, experience-distant concepts are those that are used by specialists such as ethnographers to describe their observations which are necessarily abstracted from the immediacies of the experience. As examples, Geertz speaks of "social stratification" or even "religion" as being experience-distant concepts, whereas "caste" and "nirvana" being the experience-near concepts for Hindus and Buddhists (Geertz 1983:57). Understanding the "native's point of view" then becomes a matter of juxtaposition of these concepts within the social context (i.e. through discourse). Establishing meaning is the goal of cultural and cross-cultural communication, and thus juxtaposition becomes an important component of interpretive anthropology (see Marcus

and Fischer 1986:30-31).

In summary then, the interpretive anthropologist views culture as public, and studies social action as symbolic action. S/he uses the method of juxtaposition of experience-near and experience-distant concepts, to arrive at a thick-description of that culture, which attempts to evoke the ethos and the world-view of that culture for his/her own culture. In this view of doing anthropology,

analysis of culture is not an experimental science in search of laws, but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973:5).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study employed traditional qualitative techniques common to anthropology. It relied principally on participant observation and in-depth interviews. The fieldwork process gradually evolved over a period of more than six months. During this time I journeyed through the familiar stages of making contact, establishing rapport, and settling into given roles within the community.

Making contact

My enduring interest in oppression and the varied textures of the lives of oppressed peoples all over the world led me to focus on the African American population in the United States. Thus I was attracted to the "ethos" side of life -- the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood (see Geertz 1973:127). I wished to record the micro level dynamics of the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary settings. That the church has historically been a central part of African American communities has been documented by nearly all scholars of the Black experience in the United States. I therefore set out in the summer of 1992 to find one such church that would be an

ideal setting for me to conduct fieldwork. Some of the characteristics that I had in mind were: small congregation size (between 20-40), predominantly African American, and in an easily accessible midwestern city.

I did not have any particular denomination in mind. My first few days were spent visiting different churches ranging from a small "storefront" church to one of the largest Baptist churches in the area. At the "storefront" church, I had the opportunity to take part in a revival titled "Prophetic Explosion." Four hours of speaking in tongues, the spirituals, and fire-filled preaching held me spellbound. This was not the same kind of feeling that was generated in me during the Baptist service. Unfortunately, this church did not meet very regularly and was also on the verge of closing down due to financial difficulties. This led me to do a random search of the Pentecostal churches within the city. I contacted five such churches over the telephone and received the same reply from all of them. I was told by each one of them, to go to the Church of Sweet Jesus, for they were holding a grand revival and everyone was headed there. I spoke with an Elder in the church over the phone and he asked me to visit the church that evening when the choir was practicing for the upcoming revival. When I knocked on the office door in the church, I was cordially received by Elder Conrad who recognized me as the "Indian brother who spoke over the phone!" He proceeded to

tell me about his "movement" having a "few Indian brothers in India as well as in Tennessee!" I told him that I was a student of anthropology at Iowa State University and wished to do a study of this particular church.

In keeping with the experience of most anthropologists, my initial encounter with the members of the church was very pleasant. Elder Conrad called his church "the friendliest church in the world." He introduced me to the Bishop who seemed very busy with the preparations for the revival. There were a few other young men who were introduced. Elder Conrad kept up a humorous conversation and made me feel very comfortable. After a while he asked me to come with him to the kitchen which was in the basement of the church. We passed through the sanctuary where the choir was practicing. There were about twenty men and women singing and who did not take much notice. There were a few children running around oblivious to what was happening. Elder Conrad bought me some "soul food" -- fried chicken, mashed potatoes, some greens and two slices of bread. I was introduced to some more Elders, Brothers, Mothers and Sisters as well as a Deacon and a Pastor. Everyone was addressed by their title followed by their last name. By the time I left the church, I had spent two full hours and felt strangely comfortable in a setting that was very alien to my own experience. I was also convinced that this was the group that I was looking for.

Establishing rapport

Over a six month period, I gradually grew to be a regular attender of the Sunday morning worship service. My first few attendances at the Sunday school sessions held an hour before Sunday worship begins, helped me establish some familiarity with two of the "regulars." The attendance at the Sunday school being never more than ten, the closeness of the group allowed me to converse freely with some members on an individual basis. The two "regulars" were eventually to be my main contact persons within the community. Beth and Joshua were a young couple, in their twenties, who initiated conversation. They were interested in knowing what brought me to their church. Our friendship slowly grew and I regarded my invitation to their home as part of crossing symbolic thresholds of friendships. Both Beth and Joshua were much respected in the church and I therefore got introduced to many of the other members. There was one old lady known to everyone as Mother Patterson. She was another "regular" and took an instant liking to me. I had suspected that my presence conveyed many different things to the members and was not very surprised when Mother Patterson insisted that God had sent me to her church for a particular reason. I loved to listen to her speak and very soon had the opportunity to visit her at her home for my first interview. This was in September 1992, almost three months after I first established contact. Mother

Patterson introduced me as "a fine young man" to some of the other members of the church. My familiarity with the church has thus grown steadily and I now have a more or less favorite seat in the pews for the Sunday service just like most of the regulars. People greet me when they see me at church and I am familiar with many of their names. I have also been invited to join the choir group even though I protested that I could not sing. I have visited many of the members at their homes and have got accustomed to my role within this church community.

Role within the community

The insider-outsider dichotomy has been the traditional framework for anthropologists reflecting on their role while doing research. There are other related concepts which have been commonly used: emic-etic, subject-researcher, and informant-anthropologist. In reflecting on my role within this community, I use Geertz's concepts of experience-near and experience-distant which he has himself borrowed from psychoanalysis (see Geertz 1983:57). From my perspective, I have tried my best to make my role ambiguous. There have been times when I have stressed my role as a researcher anthropologist and have been seen taking notes in church (after I found out that this is not considered sacrilegious!) There are other times when I just sat and listened to the Sunday school teacher and the pastor delivering the sermon,

not doing anything different from most other attenders in the middle and back rows of the church. I gave a testimony once when, much to my surprise, I was called to do so. At such times I stress my role as a seeker and thanked the good Lord for having given me this chance to be with His children. I have never once been asked by anyone in the church about my own religious background, and therefore I am of the impression that I may be perceived as a seeker for the most part by the church community. There are other times when I skipped Sunday service and found myself apologizing the next week to some of the members who had noticed my absence. These are the times when I stressed my role as the non-saved attender. Some of the experience-near categories that the church members use to categorize people are: saved/not-saved, saints/sinners, Pentecostals/other Christians, sanctified/ not-sanctified. In these terms, I am the not saved or sanctified, ambiguous saint, possible sinner, and of an undeclared religious affiliation. I am also a friend of the church and have been given a membership card by an Elder. The card states that I am in good standing with the church. In this way, my role within the community vacillates between the experience-distant categories used by anthropologists. I am at times the rank outsider who studies the community and at other times I am a potential insider knocking on the doors of God. I am obviously having an etic perspective, but do get glimpses of the emic

views in personal interactions with some members. In such a world, reality is neither subjective nor objective. It is intersubjective and therefore beyond the dichotomies used above. As I relate with the church members, so do I get a unique view of their lives, and it is only through such partial glimpses that the larger picture can emerge, though never completely.

Participant observation

Much of this thesis is descriptive in nature. In order to convey to the readers, such intangibles as "feelings, tones, textures, moods and meanings," it is not necessary to invoke some super-sensory empathy on the part of the anthropologist. Rather, a "two-way two-dimensional dialogue"¹ comprising an internal one within a cultural system and an external one between systems of meanings, is what is needed. According to this, the anthropologist engages in a dialogue with the community s/he is studying, much as two individuals communicate with each other. In ordinary conversation, there is a continual approximation of communication until there is an agreement on meaning. In cross-cultural communication, the anthropologist communicates by "juxtaposing experience-near or

¹ I borrow this concept from the writings of Marcus and Fischer as well as from other anthropologists who expand on "dialogue as metaphor" in the realm of interpretive anthropology.

local concepts of the cultural other...with the more comfortable, experience-far concepts that he shares with his readership" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:31).

In keeping with this spirit, I participated in and observed, a number of times, the Sunday worship service of the Church of Sweet Jesus. I did not try to enter into the heads of the members of this community. Rather, I engaged in dialogue with as many as I could, and asked them to interpret to me their own cultural performances. In all, I attended 25 Sunday worship services, four Sunday school, and two annual revivals. This was spread out over nine months between July 1992 and March 1993. I kept some field notes during this time. This contained some of my own thoughts, descriptions of the happenings, drawings of the church sanctuary, names and addresses of some members, and anything else that I wished to record. All my conversations during this participant-observation was informal and were never taperecorded. Throughout my involvement with the community, I kept as low a profile as I could, given my obviously different physical features. This helped me to establish some balance between my fringe position in the church and my occasional forays into mainstream life -- such as when I spoke with the Elders, Mothers, and the Bishop.

In-depth interviews

By the time I had begun doing interviews with individual members of the church, I had become somewhat familiar with the church members as well as the Sunday activities, and therefore knew what I wanted to ask. Establishing rapport helped me avoid many miscommunications at the time of interviewing. My regularity at the Sunday service proved to be an asset and a sign of my sincerity. My first interview was with the oldest regular member of the church and also its Supervisor. She was most eager to speak about the church and her life within it. The interview was very informal and was held at her home. I decided to start my interviewing with Mother Patterson because she was reputed to be the storehouse of historical information about the church and all the changes that it had gone through. All my other interviews were opportunistic selections from the congregation. In total, I interviewed 19 members - 9 men and 10 women. These included a Pastor, two Deacons, three Elders, three Brothers - all men, and three Mothers, and seven Sisters. Among the women interviewed were the Secretary of the church, Missionaries and a Supervisor. Most of the interviews were held at the member's home, though a few were held in the church basement. I used a taperecorder for all the interviews and later transcribed them. Each interview lasted from one and a half to three hours. On occasion I went back for more information to some of the members.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUNDAY SERVICE

The easy roads are crowded, and
The level roads are jammed.
The pleasant little rivers
With the drifting folks are crammed.
But of yonder where it's rocky,
Where you get the better view,
You will find ranks are thinning,
And the travelers are few.
-Author Unknown
(This verse was given to me by
Mother Patterson)

I had been introduced to the Church of Sweet Jesus during one of the two annual events which brought together all the various churches in the State Jurisdiction of the parent body--Church of God in Christ. It did not take long to understand that the special status of this occasion was not so much its content, as was bringing together a great many people. Every Sunday, during the rest of the year, the same events take place in small Churches of God in Christ all over the country. The attendance is considerably less, but the fervor is the same. And so it is with the "Mother Church," as this church is fondly called by the church goers in this midwestern inner-city.

Sunday is not the only day of the week that the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus congregate to praise the Lord.

They do that every day, either in the church or in the privacy of their homes or while immersed in their work. It is however a very special day of the week because it brings into the public eye, a performance of the most intimate truths revealed to them every day of their lives. It is this Sunday assembly that allows each believer to see the Lord working in other people's lives. The Sunday service is not just another ritual to be performed as a chore. It is a calling. It is a family gathering. It is where the individuals come together to reemphasize their sense of community. It is when the faint of heart and faith, come to get the fire from the inspired. It is the battleground where lines are accentuated and the enemy clearly identified. It is finally a healing place. I was witness to 25 such Sunday gatherings.

My first attendance at such a gathering was during the annual revival held in the late summer of 1992. This was part of the celebrations for the State Jurisdiction of the Churches of God in Christ. This meant all the Churches of God in Christ in the state, as well as some others who were very closely related to them, congregated at the Church of Sweet Jesus. On most other Sundays of the year, it is only the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus who congregate. Usually there are some visitors who attend the service. Although each Sunday service is unique in its own way, there are some common threads running through these services. Every service takes its form

according to the framework provided by these common threads or elements. At the same time, these elements are not limiting factors for the service. The service usually takes a life of its own entirely due to the infusion of organic elements from the members. It is this which distinguishes one service from another.

The locus of this thesis is a description of one "typical" Sunday service at this church. I attended this service on the third Sunday in March 1993, and thus it was one of my last attendances as part of the fieldwork for my thesis. In order to evoke as complete a sense of the event as possible, I start my descriptions with a brief overview of the church edifice and the sanctuary. This is followed by the narrative of the event as I experienced it. Typically, a Sunday service is preceeded by the Sunday bible school. The service then follows a more or less fixed sequence of events as follows:

1. Prayer and Songs
2. Testimonies and Songs
3. Offerings, Songs and Announcements
4. Sermon by the Pastor
5. Altar Call, Visitors' Recognition and Dismissal

The church edifice

The Church of Sweet Jesus stands on the junction of a

main road and a side road in a lower-income neighborhood of a midwestern city. There are two other churches in the adjacent two blocks. Outside the main entrance to the church is a sign depicting the name of the church and the times for the weekly Sunday service and bible study classes, as well as the meeting times for the choir practice and the women's department. On the left corner of the building is the cornerstone which exclaims, "Jesus Lifted Me." Here are etched the names of the founder of this denomination -- Bishop C. H. Mason, and the pastor of this particular church at the time of its inception -- Overseer A. R. Abernathy. It is mentioned that the church was founded in 1921 and the cornerstone laid in 1953. Below is a list of some of the main members of this church at that time.

One enters the church at a level between the kitchen, which is in the basement and the sanctuary which is on an upper level. A photograph of Bishop Jackson, the present pastor of the church, greets the visitor just before entering the sanctuary. The pews in the sanctuary are placed facing the south. This is where the dais is for the Bishop¹, and select Elders of the church. There is a podium at the center of the dais for the sermon. Just below the dais is a small table and

¹ The Bishop of this church is also the bishop for another church from the same denomination in a nearby city. Therefore he alternates weekly between his two churches. In his absence one of the Elders takes charge and preaches as the pastor.

a microphone. On either side of the table are two medium sized pianos. There is a drum set next to the west side piano and behind that is an electronic keyboard. Two large speakers adorn the extreme east and west corners of the sanctuary next to the dais. There are about five seats against the east wall next to the dais. This is where the Mothers of the church sit. There are two doors in each of these corners with signs on them. The one on the side of the drums leads to the "Pastor's Office" while the other on the side of the Mothers' seats, leads to the "Women's Department." On the south side wall is a huge cross, about ten feet long and proportionately wide. The roof is at least 30-40 feet high in the center and sloping to the sides. The cross hangs from just below the roof. Between the dais (with its single row of seats reserved for the Bishop, Pastor and the Elders) and the south wall with the cross, are three rows of seats facing the congregation. This is usually reserved for the times when the church choir performs. The sanctuary is designed to seat about 150 individuals.

A Sunday at the church

The following description is a typical sequence of events that happen at the church every Sunday. On a Sunday in March 1993, I drove into the parking lot of the Church of Sweet Jesus at 10:30 a.m. There were already about five other cars

parked in the lot. I entered the sanctuary and found Elder Williams and Pastor Matthew on the dais, and five other women sitting in the front pews. There were also two older women-- Mother Patterson and Mother Alice, sitting in the seats to the right of the dais. These seats are reserved for the Mothers of the church. All the other women in the church were referred to as Sisters. Elder Williams was prostrating at the cross behind the dais and praying loudly. As I quietly walked in and took my seat in the third pew, I received welcome smiles from the Mothers and the Pastor, many of whom knew me by now. Elder Williams' prayer consisted mostly of loud thanks and praises to the Lord interspersed with some speaking in tongues. This went on for about five minutes while the rest of the congregation swayed their heads in apparant encouragement and joined in the praying silently. After this praying, Elder Williams welcomed everyone and took up position at the table just below the dais. This signalled the beginning of the Sunday bible school.

Sunday bible school

All the members in the congregation had their bibles in their hands when Elder Williams began the school. The bibles looked well worn and thumbed. The lesson for this day was on "God's Choice Of Joshua." Apart from the bible, there was a booklet titled "Power for Living" which was also being

referred to by the members. This was an adult quarterly published by the Church of God in Christ and it was this booklet that scheduled the weekly lessons that the church members studied. I had been given a copy of this booklet by Mother Patterson and could therefore follow the proceedings better. Every chapter in this booklet had a biblical verse which was accompanied by an extended explanation involving various questions for the reader. At the beginning of each chapter were two statements--the Bible Truth and the Lesson Aim. Today's verses were from Joshua 1:1-11. The Bible Truth was that "God calls His people to have courage" and the Lesson Aim was "That you will face life with courage, knowing that God is always with you."

Elder Williams requested any member to read the relevant verses for the congregation. He then proceeded to try to expand on what was being said in the verses. Before he could get very far with his explanations, Mother Patterson interjected by asking some questions relating to the lesson. She seemed to be directing these questions to no one in particular. Her questions were received with nods of approval by the members and had a quieting effect on Elder Williams. No one however ventured to answer any of her questions. Mother Patterson then apparantly took charge of the proceedings and answered her own questions. The theme she had brought up was on the qualities that were valued by God in every individual

who was seeking to follow His path. This was in reference to the quality of submission and courage which God found abundantly in Joshua. As she was waxing eloquently, there were interjections of "Amen!" from the congregation. Everybody seemed to be completely engrossed in what Mother Patterson was saying. Even Elder Williams was asked to read the verses from time to time by Mother Patterson. Pastor Matthew too, joined the proceedings with his comments.

Some of the exchanges during this Sunday school session ran as below:

"I do not think God will call anybody without the Holy Ghost. He will not send anybody without preparing you. He prepares you by cleaning you with the Holy Ghost."

"Amen!"

"How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace and bring good tidings!"

"If you don't believe in the tithing system, you don't believe in the bible."

"We can turn the world upside down -- 30-40 million of us. If twelve apostles can do it, how much we can change."

"Say it Mother!"

"How can they preach except they be saved?"

"Submission is most important. We have to overcome a lot of attitudes. This is the path of sufferings. If we don't overcome it we can't make it."

At this point the discussion moved on to a story which Mother Patterson told about a "false preacher" who, after being ordained, showed signs of arrogance, rather than humility. To this Pastor Matthew replied:

"Bishop Abernathy had said that we must stop ordaining, because after they get ordainment they can change. Also you don't have to brag about yourself and how Holy you

are. The people can see and hear. The proof is in the pudding."

Then amidst cries of encouragement from the congregation, he proceeded to relate the story of how he had worked his way up from being a sinner to being saved and cleaning the church at 4 a.m. in the winters. He asserted that faith was the only way -- faith that God will save you. He said,

"Good news is not about the church or the pastor or the choir. It is about the gospel, about the risen Christ. We don't have to tell people that they are sinners. We attract souls by example. Jesus didn't go out to make a name. We shouldn't go out to be seen."

At this point Sister Hemphill stood up and spoke about giving testimonies. She said,

"People don't see nothing in us except the difference between them and us. Testimonies can help others."

She then proceeded to tell the story of a prostitute who was on the streets and seeking help. She had no place to stay and no money to buy food. Everybody advised Sister Hemphill not to take the prostitute into her home. Sister Hemphill thought otherwise. She said,

"Now that's a soul," referring to the prostitute. "As long as she cleans up her act, and respects us, she's got a home. I got an extra room at my home." Then she proudly announced that the prostitute now had a job at the local inn. She continued excitedly, "Proclaiming the Gospel is giving the Good News. Not that you are a sinner. But to tell the prostitute that she don't have to do this. I'll go talk to the gangs -- 'cause they are searching for love too. Just like we was looking one day."

The congregation then burst into song. Everyone was singing praises of the Lord. It was nearing 11:30 by now. An hour had passed and it was time for the school to end. Elder Williams asked everyone to stand, thanked the Lord and dismissed school. There was a little time left for the Sunday service to start. By this time more members had begun to arrive. I sat in my seat and reflected.

Prayer and song

The transition from Sunday school to the Sunday service is very informal, as is much of the service itself. The members however are usually dressed formally, with the men wearing suits or jackets, and the women wearing dresses. Many women also wear a hat. Sometimes the Bishop wears his flowing white robe for preaching the Word. People make their entry into the sanctuary at various times during the service. Even some Elders enter the sanctuary and take their place on the dais while the service is in session. The only time when I have not seen anyone arrive and take a seat on the dais is when the Pastor is giving the sermon.

At around 11:40 the congregation abruptly burst into song. Sister Ethel who is one of the most regular members of the church led the singing which was mostly done by women. Occasionally, there are some males who join in the singing and who sometimes take the lead, too. The congregation which had

by now grown to about twenty five people, kept the rhythm by clapping their hands. The organist and the drummer had also taken up positions and were effortlessly playing their parts.

"What a mighty God we serve,
He woke me up this mornin'
Start me on my way
Oh, what a mighty God we serve."

As the song ebbed (for the songs never actually end formally, rather being eased out by the next activity), Elder Williams went up to the podium and read Jeremiah 10:1-6. Then he prayed to the Lord thanking Him for allowing everyone to gather again in His House. The congregation again burst into a song, this time led by Mother Patterson. All along, the musicians just continued playing softly. The beat and the rhythm seemed to be hanging in the air at all times. When the singing commenced again, the music gathered pace and finally it was only the music that was being played. The congregation was clapping and tapping their feet. After about five to ten minutes in this manner, Elder Williams again went to the podium. Taking this cue, the music decreased in volume. Elder Williams then invited Sister Ethel and Sister Mary to lead the testimonies.

Testimonies and songs

The two Sisters approached the table below the dais from where the testimonies would be received. On reaching the table and the microphone, they instantly broke into a song:

"There is no failure in God.
 You don't have to worry,
 And you don't have to fret,
 By serving your Master
 Who's ne'er failed you yet.
 It's no secret what God can do,
 What He's done for others
 He'll do for you.
 O, there's no failure in God.
 Sometimes no food on the table,
 But I know that God is able.
 When you're down to the last dime
 You know that He'll come on time.
 He might not come when you call Him
 But He'll come on time.
 There's no failure in God."

Then Sister Ethel gave her testimony.

"I thank the Lord for waking me up this mornin', and bringing me to His House....For bringing me out of the world of sin. He didn't have to do it, but He did it. Hallelujah! The Lord took the hate out of my heart. Gave me inner peace. I had so much hate in my heart. I wanted to commit murder. But He saved me. Saved and sanctified me. I had a heart attack. The doctors told me I had a sickle cell disease. Everyone was surprised when I healed completely. When God's the surgeon, He leaves no scar. I thank the Lord for my Bishop, Pastor, the Mothers and Deacons and all the saints of God that are here. Pray for me."

As soon as she finished her testimony, the singing began, accompanied by the band. The two Sisters stood at the table and joined in the singing. Usually, the person who wished to give a testimony would also be the one who would start the song just before her testimony. Almost always in my experience, it has been a woman who gives her testimony. On rare occasions however, I heard a man give his testimony. As the song neared its end, the Sister who had begun the song stood up to give her testimony. This time it was Sister Beth.

The testimony session continued as long as there was someone who wished to give a testimony. Sister Hemphill who sat on the second pew gave her testimony too. She is a regular testimony giver and one of the more fiery speakers in the church. She first sang a song.

"In the name of Jesus
We have the victory.
In the name of Jesus
Satan you have to flee.
Tell me who can come for us
When we call on His great name
Jesus, Jesus, Precious Jesus
We have the victory."

Then she gave her testimony,

"I thank the Lord for bringing me to His House this mornin'. He didn't have to do it, but he did. I feel so good praising His name. I pray for all the saints assembled here, for my Bishop, the Pastor, the Deacons, and the Mothers....We don't praise His name enough. Hallejuiah!...I thank the Lord for having saved and sanctified me...for my daughter who is 25 years old and will be graduating soon. God takes care of the singles--the widows. God will supply your needs if you have faith in Him....I owe no taxes. My house is paid for....We don't have enough faith in God. We want Him to do things for us in a hurry--just like McDonalds! God is a good God for what He has done. He has already done too much. I ask you to pray for my family."

The songs then continued as before. Elder Adams was the lead singer this time. He was on the dais. He is one of the few Elders who sings and dances on the dais. His song had an electric effect on the congregation. The sounds of music permeated the church with ever greater intensity. The music gathered pace very quickly and the first three pews were

filled with men and women dancing to the beat. There were a few young children too who seemed to be enjoying the divine music and dancing in step! Elder Adams' song was,

"I don't know what you've come to do
I've come to praise His name.
I don't know what you've come to do
I've come to clap my hands.
I don't know what you've come to do
I've come to stamp my feet.
I don't know what you've come to do
I've come to save my soul."

After this song, there were two more testimonies. Then Sister Ethel turned the service back to Elder Williams who requested Deacon Jones and Mother Patterson take charge of collecting the offerings and make the weekly announcements. For this latter duty, the Secretary of the church, Sister Lillian, who was also the daughter of Mother Patterson, was called.

Offerings, songs and announcements

Both Deacon Jones and Mother Patterson are in their eighties. As they slowly walked upto the table below the dais, Mother Patterson announced that this being the third Sunday of the month, it was the Bishop's Sunday and therefore every member was requested to give at least twenty-five dollars for the Bishop's offering. On the table were placed two offering bowls. The Secretary of the church also walked up to the table and sat down to write the accounts as the offerings were being made. All through these proceedings, the musicians were softly

playing the spiritual scales.

The members walked up to the table one by one and gave their offerings. Some gave their offerings in cash while others in cheques. As they gave, Mother Patterson and Deacon Jones counted the money and reported to Sister Lillian who entered the amount and the name of the member in her account book. The Elders on the dais too walked up and gave their offerings and so did the Mothers and the Deacons. At the end of about fifteen minutes of collecting and accounting, Mother Patterson announced that they still needed eleven dollars in order to donate the desired purse to the Bishop. As the music continued, Deacon Bernard and Sister Ethel walked upto the table and handed in their donations for the second time. Deacon Jones, too, offered some more.

Soon Mother Patterson announced that the purse had been collected and would be handed over to the Bishop. The microphone was then turned over to Deacon Jones who reminded the members that the monthly electricity bill for the church, as well as some maintenance work required some money which he hoped the members would remember the next Sunday. After this brief announcement, he asked Sister Lillian and the audience in general if they had any other announcements to make. Sister Lillian announced that there was a bus which had been chartered for the members to visit another church in a nearby city the following Sunday and that those who wished to go by

the bus had to pay ten dollars for the fare. She also had a couple of other announcements. One of them was about a baby contest which was being sponsored by the Department of Mission Coordinating Committee, a Church organization. Each church had to enter one baby between the age of 0-4 years. The babies who could collect more than \$200 in donations would receive \$100 savings certificate from the organization and the second and third prizes would be \$75 and \$50 respectively. There was also an announcement about a bake sale which had been held in the church earlier that week and the proceeds were donated to the church. Finally an announcement was made regarding a gospel concert which was to be held at a nearby college auditorium.

After these announcements were made, Elder Williams took over the podium and invited Sister Hemphill and Sister Allen to sing a song. Both these Sisters had a reputation for singing well and therefore the invitation was well applauded by the congregation. All heads turned to the two Sisters who smilingly stood up and approached the table with the microphone. They conferred with each other for a couple of minutes and then sang a song. The congregation did not join in the usual way with the clapping and the dancing. This time they sat back and nodded appreciatively. After this short song, it was time for the Word from the man of God.

Sermon by the Pastor

During the entire proceedings, and until this moment, Pastor Matthew had sat on the dais sometimes joining in the singing and always nodding in approval. Pastor Matthew had been with the church for more than fifteen years and was a very popular figure with the members. He was an averagely built man in his early fifties with a clean shaven face and a pleasant smile. He was wearing a neatly cut suit with a white shirt, and had his bible in his hand. As he rose to speak, the congregation too stood up in their seats and received him. He prayed and thanked the Lord for the chance to preach the Word and for allowing everyone to gather that day in His Home. The congregation then sat down and prepared to hear their preacher. The time was 1:30 in the afternoon. The service had been going on for about two hours. Pastor Matthew launched into an inspired half hour sermon, without once looking at any notes. He walked freely up and down the dais and sometimes even into the congregation below.

"Lord, bless us all today. Thank you for letting us come to your House of worship. Let the sinner stop sinning. Let the backslider stop backsliding. Amen!...You may all be seated.

We praise the Lord this mornin' because He's been so good to us...all week long. Because He saved my wretched soul. I was facing 20 years and was already on paper for breaking into a store...for those of you who know what being on paper means...then I got into a gang and they broke into a store as I watched...I didn't want to do it...It was Friday the 13, and I know I'm not superstitious. They took me to Knoxville. After 43 days the grand jury found

me not guilty. But during those days I spent in the jail, I started praying to God. I would be clearing the courthouse and I would say, 'Lord, if you will bless me to get outta here, I will go back to church.' Everyday at six o'clock I started crying. I needed to be somebody's child. Then they found me not guilty and put me on a bus here. I came here and bogeyed the night away!"

This remark was received with laughter by the congregation and shouts of encouragement as usual. Pastor Matthew was speaking pacing the dais and looking closely at everyone in the congregation. The bible lay unopened on the podium. He continued:

"I bogeyed the night away. Didn't thank God. But God is merciful. I've been in plenty situations that could have cost my life. The devil hates your guts as a sinner as well as a saint. He'll get us to backslide, to get us to go against God. I'm not preaching. I'm testifying....Dangerous situations--yet God saved me. You'll get sick of sinning. You'll get sick of all the clubs, women, men. Pretty soon you'll turn to God. He blessed me to live 27 years without backsliding. I know I'm not perfect, but I haven't backslided since....Even in our sins He loves us. I know that the bible says that He is angry with the wicked. But that is like a mother getting angry with the child. It doesn't mean that He is not loving. Let me tell you a story that happened to me yesterday. I wished to visit the Senior Citizen's Home. On the way I went past Cooper's Heart...young men were playing cards. I wanted to play a game of 21. I sat and wathced. God said to me, 'You said you're going to the Senior Citizen Home.' I watched and after a while lost interest in the game. I went to the Senior Citizen Home. I was visiting Mother Harrison. There was a group which came in to visit too--another denomination. They endeavor to visit all sick people. I then decided that I too should do the same. So I went and visited Mother Lundi and then another and then another. We need to pray that God will give us power. Satan is working on the saint's minds. All thoughts go to our minds. We start

thinking about what our friends will say if we do not want to sin...If Satan can get your mind, He can get you. 'Cause if you're out of your mind you can't pray. You can't say, 'Lord, forgive me.'
Now say a prayer for me as I go into the Word of God."

Pastor Matthew then opened his well-thumbed bible and motioned to Sister Mary to read aloud from Genesis chapter 3, verse 8 onwards. As Sister Mary read a line, Pastor Matthew would repeat the line loudly and explicate its meaning to the congregation. The congregation responded with enthusiasm. The verses dealt with the "original sin" story. The sermon continued:

"...They [Adam and Eve] knew that they were naked. Don't we know that right now we are standing naked in front of God? I'm wearing a suit here, but I know that I am actually naked. I have a question for all of you. 'If God would call you today, where will you be?'

...Wake up! You keep thinking that there ain't nothin' wrong not coming on Tuesday nights [to church]. And then...ain't nothin' wrong not coming on Friday night. I'm not going to backslide missing one night, uh? But what if God expects to call you then? Where are you going to run, hide when the world's on fire?...God tells us to be faithful. If you are not faithful, you are not truthful. The bible's right anywhere. I can't understand those who say, 'I follow the Holy Ghost.' But the Holy Ghost does not tell you to come on time to church? God is tired of your foolishness. God is going to call our names. Satan is working from the pulpit to the door [of the church]. Satan will destroy us if we are not watchful.

There are the preachers who preach being slothfull. They only want to take the offerings we pay. God should be able to depend on you. He shouldn't have to hunt you out in the garden [of lust]. It's time to stop hiding from God. He knows we neck. (At this point Pastor Matthew quotes from memory a verse about Isiah and his knowing that he was unclean). If we forget about money, we can turn the city upside down. If we had a street revival, if

we get together...God is calling for holy people, for faithful people, for pure people. 'Be ye holy as I am holy.' We have forgotten God. We read the bible and listen to the pastor. 'Praise me with your lips,' but your heart is away from me. To know to do good and do it not is sin. There are some who don't think that drinking is bad, that it is a sin. There are some who don't think that lying is a sin too! We all need to repent. Am I waking you all up a little bit?"

The congregation then responds with yeas and shouts to preach more.

"I'm afraid we don't fear God. The older saints [looks at where the Mothers are sitting] say, 'I'm glad I didn't get saved in these times.' (Pastor Matthew then talks about the promiscuity of the youngsters). If you are single, be faithful to Jesus. You think there's ain't no harm in kissing. Then there's ain't no harm in laying. The single are not single. They are to be married to Jesus. When you start licking lip and sucking tongue (the pastor gestures these acts much to the amusement of the audience, young and old alike!), things start happening. When the hands rub together, heat is produced. I know I'm being very graphical. Yes, yes. This is ol' time preaching. God wants us to prosper and be in health even as our soul prospers.

What are you doing for God? If you say I don't know what God does for me, I don't understand you. Saints we gotta get together. You can play church if you want. Some in here are playing church. Ain't no harm in this or that. Ain't no harm in harm. Everythings out there (points outside the window). Go there! Booze, men, women...AIDS, syphilis...(laughter from the congregation). Then you come one day and start crying. God sees through me lying as He sees through you too. God will puke at the way we do!...Where are thou?"

There is about a minute's silence as the pastor paces up and down the dais. The time is 1:55 p.m. The pastor continued:

"I know you've all heard God's voice sometime. I don't want to tell people anything. But we gotta be faithful. We gotta stop hiding among the trees, wrapped in nicotine, clothed in unrighteousness, in the garden of our lust. We need to praise all day long. The Word comes to get me as much as it comes to get you. I must ask you, 'do you really love church?' (There is

silence. The pastor laughs softly and sarcastically exclaims that none responded). When we were down in New Orleans, the pastor used to say, 'I will let you all go home 'cause your minds are already gone!' That young man, is not the one on trial (referring to a local trial for murder). Society is on trial. He didn't know to read. He only knew violence. We are so busy bickering, while the young men and women are dying. We are hiding in the garden. God asks, 'Where are thou?' Where are the men on dope? The bible says that the righteous scarcely make it. then where will the unrighteous be? It's time for us to be real. Be real for God.

(Turns to the other Elders on the dais, and tells the story of an Elder in a church who wished to allow a young man who would come rarely to church, to lead testimony services). I can't understand. If you ain't faithful, not come to church in dogs years, you ain't got nothin' to say. Then you shouldn't lead testimony. You need to repent. I knew a young man like that. He will be allright...until the playoffs. And then there will be the Superbowl and then the World Series. He didn't come to church.

I want to be out on the streets helping somebody. I want to be where God wants me to be--not just behind the pulpit. I hope I said something to stir up your minds. If I was angry, I was angry at the devil! Amen. Is there anyone who needs to be prayed for?"

This signifies the end of the sermon and the congregation expectantly looks around for anyone seeking to be prayed for.

Altar call, visitors' recognition and dismissal

Many times the altar call and the visitors' recognition coincide. The visitor may be the one who is prayed for. This day the only visitor was Sister Spriggs' aunt from Memphis. She was sitting in the second pew and was asked by the pastor to stand and announce her name and where she came from. After that, she was called to the altar. There Elder Williams opened a bottle containing olive oil and handed it to the pastor.

Elder Adams too stood behind Elder Williams and laid his hand on his shoulder. Elder Williams had his right hand on Pastor Matthew's shoulder as if to support him. Pastor Matthew took some oil from the bottle and placed his right hand on the forehead of the woman. She had both her hands raised in the air by this time and the music started playing. The Pastor, as well as Elder Williams prayed for the woman. During this the Pastor whispered into the woman's ears and had his hand on her shoulder. The congregation too was standing up and clapping, dancing and shouting praises to the Lord. After about three minutes of intense praying, the Pastor stopped and withdrew his hands from the woman's shoulders. The two Elders too withdrew their hands. The woman was by now visibly moved and was crying. She then walked back to her seat. Finally Pastor Matthew after confirming that there was no other person who wanted to be prayed for, asked the congregation to raise their right hands and pray to the Lord and be dismissed. The time was 2:15 p.m. The entire service had lasted more than two and a half hours. Everyone shook hands with each other and mingled around for some time, before slowly moving out to their cars. Usually small groups of people would go out to eat lunch together. The Pastor and Elder Williams shook hands with everyone. Mother Patterson slowly moved out to her car aided by Mother Alice and Deacon Bernard. Brother Sidney and Brother David, the two musicians on the keyboards and the piano

respectively, locked up the offices of the Pastor and the main door when everyone had left. The church would open up again at four o'clock that same afternoon for a women's meeting. I was thoroughly fatigued by the time I reached my car and prepared to go home. The words of the Pastor and the music were still ringing in my ears.

Conclusion

This then is a description of a typical Sunday service at the Church of Sweet Jesus. If one were to visit an African American Pentecostal church anywhere in the U.S.A., it would be possible to identify the main elements in that service as being common to the above description. But these are merely the factors which provide the structural framework for the actions of the members within the church. Knowledge of these factors alone, is inadequate for a genuine understanding of why the Sunday service of the Pentecostals takes on this particular form. It is here that one has to consider the context of this cultural action. The substance of the Sunday service contains within itself, the meanings which every action has for the believers. It is this substance which delimits, if not determines the form of the Sunday service. It is to this substance that we now turn our sights, in an effort to contextualize the Sunday service, or as Geertz would have us say -- "to fill in the details and descriptive

elaborations" and thus complete the picture. The following chapter seeks to do this by weaving into this picture some of the meanings which are implicit in the service.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION OF THE SERVICE

Was Jesus humble, or did He
Give any proofs of His humility?
When but a child He ran away
And left His parents in dismay:
These were the words upon His tongue
"I am doing My Father's business."

In attempting an interpretive analysis of the Sunday service at the Church of Sweet Jesus, I have considered the service to be a publicly acted out document. "Reading" cultural forms, as one would read a text, or seeking meaning as one would in a dialogue, is an accepted method of cultural analysis within the realm of interpretive anthropology (Marcus and Fischer 1986:30). Consequently, this chapter is a "reading" of this document. The concepts outlined earlier in the section on interpretive anthropology in chapter two, are useful in this endeavor. As pointed out in that chapter, the function of the anthropologist being that of a cultural interpreter, the remainder of this thesis is devoted to explicating the meanings which are contained within the Sunday service. By doing this, one is enabled to better understand the "cultural world" of this small group of inner city African Americans.

Even as knowledge of the painter illumines the painting

and brings out subtle meanings which the painting conceals, so does a knowledge of the saints at the Church of Sweet Jesus reveal subtle meanings contained within the Sunday service. It is however, very easy to fall prey to reductionist analysis while seeking knowledge of the saints. This point may be elaborated with the help of the painter/painting analogy referred to above. The sociological fact that a painter is rich or that s/he comes from an extended family system, does not entail a causal relation between these facts and the paintings which s/he produces. While the social conditions within which the painting is produced, undeniably affects the painting, it is reductionistic to suggest that the painting exists because of the social conditions, or that the painting always reflects social conditions.

Other possibilities too need to be included in the analysis. One such possibility which is relevant to the analysis of the Sunday service is whether the social conditions of production of the painting form the framework for the painter to interpret his/her own work. Viewed thus, the social conditions do not need to be the determinants of the outcome of the action. Such an approach essentially liberates the actor from the sociological and psychological factors to which reductionist arguments seek to limit. Additionally, such a view, charts the course for a possible technique to understand emic meanings. By contextualizing the

painting within its social conditions, the audience is better able to grasp the meanings which the painting holds for the painter him/herself. It offers an opportunity for the outsider to see the painting through the same viewing glass as the painter. This eliminates the need for a metaphysical "entering into the heads of the natives" approach, which in my opinion characterizes the functionalist methods of sociologism and psychologism. Drawing from the above analogy, a short journey on the same boat as the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus, offers us brief glimpses into the meaning which the service has for them. In doing so we might even be able to gain insights into the "rationale" of the Sunday service, and will surely increase our understanding of a segment of human society very commonly ill-understood.

In this chapter, I attempt to situate the Sunday service in its larger context -- the lives of the members of the church. A brief sketch of the personal histories of some of the members of the church is followed by a discussion of the personal transformative experiences many of the members have. I have then included a section on the views which are generally held by the members regarding issues such as racism and oppression. This brief section enables us to better glimpse the secular world-view of the members. Following this, I have entered into a "reading" of the Sunday service as described in the previous chapter. Through all these

discussions, I have noted my own insights and reflections, and have presented them as the third-order interpretations in which the anthropologist engages while "inscribing" the meanings in the ethnography (see page 23 of this thesis).

The goal of this chapter then, as well as that of this ethnography, is to present an alternative view of the phenomenon of the Pentecostal Sunday service, as being a cultural performance in which the participants express their ethos and world-views and also learn about themselves and the society in which they live. Here the Sunday service is seen in the same light as the Balinese cockfight, in Geertz' work (Geertz 1973:412-453). In this analogy, the Sunday service is a statement which the church members make about themselves -- an African American reading of a Pentecostal experience (or vice versa), a "story they tell themselves about themselves" (Ibid 448).

The saints: Personal histories

The "saints of God" is a term used to denote a general body of believers who are present in the church and who have stopped sinning. Stopping sinning is a sign that one has been saved. Not all saints at the Church of Sweet Jesus are sanctified. Sanctification is an experience subsequent to being saved and this involves the Baptism of the Holy Ghost. This is an intensely spiritual experience and the external

sign of this baptism is the speaking in tongues which the believers accept as a manifestation of the Spirit operating through a human medium. Being saved and sanctified is an ideal for which all members are expected to strive. The question, "Are you saved?" is a constant reminder to those who are lagging behind. In fact every action within the church and all the actions of the saved and sanctified members outside the church, is constantly reinforcing this ideal as attainable and worthy.

The saints of God at the Church of Sweet Jesus vary in age from the very old (eighty years and above) to the very young (teenagers). Age is revered in this church, but only if it is accompanied by sanctification. The Mothers and the Elders are the dominant voices within the church and the younger members occupy subordinate roles as church members. Some of the older members of the church came from the South during the early 1900s. There were others, such as Mother Patterson, the second oldest member of the Church of Sweet Jesus, whose father had migrated from West Virginia and her mother from Tennessee, but she herself had been born in a coal mining town in the midwest and had moved residence whenever the "mine played out." In fact Mother Patterson had married one of the earlier pastors of the Church of Sweet Jesus sometime in the 1930s. She had since stayed in the same church and was hence considered one of the pillars of the church

community. Similarly, Deacon Bernard and his wife Sister Bernard (both in their sixties), had migrated from Tennessee and now had a family of six sons and one daughter in the same city. Elder Williams (in his late forties), served some years in the army and then decided to come back to the midwest where he grew up. There were some other men and women (in their early thirties), who came from some other cities to this midwestern city in search of jobs. Many of the younger members had been born and brought up in the same city and within this same church.

The vocations of the church members did not fit into any pattern which could be seen as being other-worldly in any way. While most of the women in the church had temporary part-time jobs, the men held more steady jobs ranging from sales to factory worker to accountant. Elder Williams was an insurance agent and Sister Mary was training to be a computer software programmer. Her daughter too had just graduated with a Bachelor of Business degree. When I mentioned that I had switched my field of study from engineering to anthropology, one of the Elders wondered aloud as to why I had left a practical career like engineering! The ones who had retired from an active working life, were usually the Mothers and the few very old Deacons. Some of them had their pensions and lived on their own, whereas some lived with their son or daughter.

The church members speak of "doing church." As one of the older members puts it,

"...See, this body is made up of a group of saved people. The church is not the building. The church is you...Jesus said that He's coming back after His church. He's coming for a church without a spot, without a wrinkle, without a blemish. So that means you know what you really have to do. You have to be really saved, really living for God."

One of the most striking features of the church, is the utmost seriousness with which they "do church." When Joshua and Beth, my two chief informants, described how they spend a typical day, they spoke about thinking of the Lord all the time. They spend much time reading the bible, asking questions of each other and reflecting on its message. This is not a pastime for them. Very occasionally they watch some television and even at such times they are actively interpreting the larger society in the light of their own worldview. Not unlike the Spinozas of history, the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus resemble the "God intoxicated people" of the world.

The Sunday service is not the only time during the week that the church members meet. The church organization has many small departments/committees which organize activities throughout the week and facilitate contact between members outside the official church hours. Older Mothers visit each other almost everyday, if only to be together. The Women's Department, the Young People Willing Workers (YPWW), the Sunshine Band, Purity Class, Usher Board, Mother's Board,

Young Women's Christian Council (YWCC), Mission Circle, and Home and Farm Mission, are all various committees in the church. Every member of the church is involved in some capacity with at least one of the above committees. This enables the member to become familiar with other members, as well as provides a channel for the member to cultivate his/her own faith. It is in this sense that the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus constitute a community.

Personal transformations

In all my interactions with the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus, there was a common theme which I could identify. Almost all of the people I interviewed had some life-changing experience. This intense experience resulted in a complete change in his/her way of life. S/he no longer acted in the same way as before and moreover changed his/her attitude to life. In short there appeared to be a kind of "bridge-burning" associated with the intense personal transformative experience. The transformative experiences were essentially spiritual in nature and produced a qualitative change in the individuals's faith in God and life. This spiritual experience acted itself out on any of three levels:

1. The physical level.
2. The behavioral level.
3. The religious or ideological level.

Transformative experiences on the physical level are very common among the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus. This is frequently referred to as healing. The members speak about these experiences in their testimonies and constantly refer to it in their conversations with each other. Sister Ethel's testimony (see chapter two), is a good example of this kind of a transformative experience. Typically, the particular illness or disease is diagnosed as hopeless by a medical practitioner, and then when the individual throws him/herself at the mercy of God, the "miracle" happens. Elder Williams was healed of cancer. This healing was not as dramatic as Sister Ethel's. But nevertheless, this was seen as being due to the "mysterious working of the Lord." Elder Williams expresses his amazement at his recovery, saying, " I don't know what He saved me for, but He saved me." There are some others who describe at length their experience. Elder McGee said,

"...I was bleeding from the rectum, throwing out blood. I had lost about three-fourths of the blood in my body. Amen! I was in the hospital room and I passed out....I then went to a place, really clean and beautiful, but cold. Saints! I was gone. O, I heard the voice of Jesus. I heard the voice of my wife telling the nurse, 'I ain't going anywhere. He's my husband.' I then woke up. Jesus is my healer. In the name of Jesus. He's the only God I know that performed open-heart surgery without cutting once!"

Sometimes the physical level experience saves the individual from a physically dangerous life situation. Sister Jenkins tells this story:

"I was on my porch one day when a young man came up to me and asked if he could use the phone. I could see that he had a gun under his coat. At the same time my little daughter came into the house with her friend. The young man kept looking at the door. There were many cop cars outside on the street. The young man could have done anything to us. I kept very quiet and allowed him to stay in the house until the cops disappeared....All the while God watched over us. Anything could have happened to us. I thank God for saving me and my family."

The behavioral level experience is typically of the kind which enables the individual to give up a "sinful" way of life. The sinful way of life could be one filled with alcohol, drugs, multiple sexual partners, theft, cheating, or even murder. The Pastor's life story which he recounts often (see chapter two) is a good example of this kind of experience. Sometimes this experience overlaps with the earlier kind--on the physical level. In such cases the individual exclaims,

"I thank God for another day free from sin. He's been so good. He opened up a door for me. When I was a sinner, God picked me up and saved me. He healed my body. Healed my stomach...."

Finally, the religious and ideological level experience transforms the individual from either a religious non-believer to a believer, or from a non-Pentecostal to a Pentecostal. As Mother Patterson accounts her transformation from a Baptist to a Pentecostal:

"I went to the Holiness Church one night and I heard the difference in the preaching, you know. The pastor preached and I liked it and I never went back anymore to the Baptist Church....But first I had gone to the Holiness Church to laugh at them...they were really funny to us. We didn't know anything about Holiness and

Pentecostalism. And they danced and sang and I thought it was funny at first....And so that kept going and I got really interested. And then, the Word of God. I guess it found a place in my heart and I just decided that this was what I wanted. I really liked the doctrine, I liked the preaching. After I understood what it was all about, that was all I wanted. And so I've been there...I got saved when I was 16 and I've been in the COGIC ever since. I've never left it. And it has been my life, you know. I think that without it I wouldn't know what I would have done. "cause my husband died when I was...(forgets age) and had 12 children at that time. And without the help of the Lord I don't think that I would have made it."

Brother Joshua too speaks about a religious experience. This happened to him when he was somewhat indifferent to religion, but was seeking inner peace at the same time. One day as he was listlessly flipping through the television channels, his fingers kept bringing him back to a channel broadcasting a COGIC service in Memphis. Since he came from a family which belonged to the same denomination, he was able to understand the service to a large extent. But he had not been saved yet. On that day, however, his attention became slowly rivetted by the preacher and he found himself agreeing with what the preacher said on the channel. Finally, when the preacher asked for all those who wished to be saved to raise their hands, Brother Bell subconsciously raised his too. That was the sign that he had been waiting for and very soon he found himself attending a COGIC service and being anointed and saved.

The saints and oppression

The Church of Sweet Jesus welcomes everyone into its

fold. During the months that I attended the church, Joshua and Beth, two of my chief informants, got married. It was an inter-racial marriage -- Joshua was black and Beth was white. Before they left for Memphis to get married, there was a brief ceremony at the church to bless them. There are other inter-racial couples, too, in the Church of Sweet Jesus. Both Joshua and Beth spoke about the priorities which their families had regarding their marriage. To both the families, the fact that the other was also a saved and sanctified saint of God, overrode any difference in color. Such a hierarchy of priorities is not uncommon among the other members of the same church. When I asked Mother Alice about racism in the U.S.A., she replied:

"Racism. Now I don't believe in racism. I grew up with white people. And in the coal-mining town where I grew up, we didn't have nothin' like that. Everybody was friends to everybody. The whites helped the blacks, the blacks helped the whites. My father was a barber. He cut white hair, black hair. We even slept at each other's houses. And my children do the same thing. When they were growing up, they had white friends as well as black friends. Their white friends came and ate at my table, and slept in my bed. We didn't make no difference. I don;t believe in color anyway. It's what the person is that's inside. It's not the color or the race. It's what in the heart or how he acts. So racism, I never did believe in that!"

But as soon as she finished saying this, she hastened to add:

"...oh, we've come up against some of it you know, but I didn't let it affect me."

Mother Patterson speaks about the younger generation not being

as responsible as her own generation had been brought up to be:

"...Another thing you have to teach children is that you have to be responsible for yourself. People now, they think that the world owes them something. But if you don't work for something, then you don't get it. If it's worth having, then it's worth working for. That's what we were taught. We were taught to be citizens in our communities or wherever we worked, and that means you stay out of stuff you don't have a business with."

Such views on the race issue in the U.S.A. is very much in keeping with the politically more conservative view usually associated with the "integrationist" model. In such a model, the social problems afflicting Blacks in the inner cities are seen to be solvable on an individual and community level, rather than on a national and political level. The philosophy of self-help is the one which is employed by the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus. They do not feel the need to engage in political activism. Rather they concentrate on the personal transformation of the individual and have implicit faith that such true personal transformations will eventually produce large scale social transformation.

There are however some of the younger members who hold slightly different views on social problems than the Mothers and Elders of the church. Speaking about the first Rodney King verdict when the police officers were acquitted, Brother Sidney expressed his discontent at "this blatant practice of racism." He also spoke about how he was a close follower of

the activities of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Brother Louis Farrakhan, even though he had problems with some of his violent ways. Brother Joshua analysed the inner city racial tensions as being rooted in economic inequality. Despite this difference in viewing "racism", the church members in general concentrate on moving beyond simple color prejudices and work to improve inner-city life.

In the following pages, I turn back to the description of the Sunday service and do a "reading" of it. All the contextual information, such as the personal histories of the members, along with other information gathered through interviews, are crucial aids in interpreting the picture. The observer of the Sunday service interprets what s/he sees, but this interpretation is bounded by his/her position as an observer. The view then is partial and hence relative. Social reality may thus be viewed as a diamond with many facets, with no view claiming to see its entirety. The following readings present yet other views than those found in the traditional literature (reviewed in chapter two), of a typical Pentecostal Sunday service, without proclaiming any one view as the Truth. The reading follows the sequence of the main elements that comprise it.

"Reading" the Sunday bible school

The Sunday bible school is the setting for the translation of the "official" doctrines of the parent Church - Church of God In Christ, into what we have earlier defined as "folk" religion. The reference booklet -- Power For Living, is a publication of the parent body and contains among other things, the philosophical basis for living as a saint of God in the Church. The church members do a reading of the particular chapter scheduled for the week and engage in their own interpretations. These interpretations are however guided within the framework of the church by the Elders and the Mothers of the church. This is seen in the way the dialogues proceed during school.

The school begins with a definite structure -- the Elder controls the flow of the exchanges and defers to the Mothers whenever they have something to say. The members initially listen to the teachings. But very soon the structure becomes fluid and there are times when it is difficult to say who is the teacher and who the taught. There seems to be no single direction of flow of teachings. Sometimes it is Mother Patterson who assumes the role of the teacher, at other times it is one of the members. This is seen in the way Sister Hemphill gave her testimony.

The Sunday school offers the members an excellent opportunity to engage in a critique of the church as well as

the larger society. In telling her story about the prostitute, Sister Hemphill contextualized many subtle philosophical points to the daily lives of the members. The members of the church are called upon to love every human being and to give the Good News. But such an indiscriminating love can only be possible if one is able to see every being as a soul. Thus her exclamation, "Now that's a soul," in the face of the general advice that she received from around her, may be viewed as her rationale for putting the high philosophy of the church into practice. This is a call to do community service because "one serves God by serving one's fellow human being." Her testimony further contains subtle critiques of the role of the church and its own positions on various issues that affect the members in their daily lives. When she said that the gangs on the streets are "looking for love," she echoes a common belief of the church members that human beings are essentially good. The problems arise due to their forsaking God and His ways. Her testimony also emphasized going beyond external affectations to a deeper and truer understanding of God's word.

The members of the church are adept at narrating stories. Story telling is used in the school as a way of personalizing the morals and edicts of the church. It is also an opportunity for the members to play the role of a performer and be assured of an audience. The audience is, in turn, a participating and

encouraging one. The dialogue that took place between the Mother and the Elders, brings out various themes such as submission and tithing. This explicates what is seen as "good behavior" by the church.

There is also reference to change, both internal or personal, as well as external or social. The strength of the entire Pentecostal movement in the U.S.A. is seen as a potent vehicle for social change. The booklet asks the members to discuss practical, this-worldly methods for effecting social change on a community level. One such example addresses the issue of pursuing justice in this world. The booklet points out that wealthy people can hire brilliant lawyers who can increase their chances of beating any criminal charge, whereas poor people who are charged with crimes have to settle for public defenders who may not be very competent. Further, wealthy people get tax-breaks which allow them to often pay less in taxes than the middle-class people. Thus the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. With this background, the booklet poses the questions for discussion:

Does it really have to be this way? What are the ways in which injustice is practiced in your community? What do you think can be done about it?

Sunday school also says something about status within the church. The story about the "false preacher" reiterates two major points for the members. One is that humility is a

desirable and Godly virtue. The other is that the Pastor of the church is not above reproach by the members. This latter point assures the members that there is no human being who is greater than the church. A member of the church achieves superior status only by clearly demonstrating to the members that s/he is truly sanctified. The signs for this are not just restricted to the "gifts" spoken of in the bible. Rather the Godly qualities of submission, humility and honesty are equally sought in the person. Thus Mother Patterson's clout within the church is moral and spiritual. If she desired, she could manipulate the church to suit her selfish needs. But she would soon lose her clout because her sanctified status would be compromised. Status comes with "being in this world but not of it." Thus status is an achieved one and is by no means a permanent one. Backsliding is possible for the ordained Pastors, too. An additional point which comes out here is that the members love to hear stories about coming away from the "sinful life." The Pastor's life story is usually well received and accompanied by encouragements. Such stories offer living proof that one can stop sinning if one is willing to try.

In these ways the Sunday bible school may be seen to be used in many different ways by the members. One of these is surely to create poetry out of the prose of life, to create a bouquet out of weeds, to create a tool out of metal scraps, to

create dignity out of downtroddenness, the aesthetic out of the mundane, and finally spirit out of matter. We now turn to the next main element that characterizes the Sunday service.

"Reading" the testimonies

Testimonies are the most creative vehicle for the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus. It is through this that the members are able to articulate in their own words what the Church, God and life means to them. The outstanding feature of the service is the degree to which the members participate in "doing church." The testimonies offer each member the opportunity to play the role of a preacher for a short time during the service. Most of the members in the Church of Sweet Jesus have not had a lengthy formal education. They are thus practitioners of the oral traditions of African Americans. Giving a testimony is very much the oral transmission of cultural values and beliefs shared within the church community. It is thus a highly encouraged activity.

Interspersing testimonies with the spirituals, facilitates a smooth transition from one testimony to the other. It also allows the testimony giver to "warm up" before giving his/her testimony. Even though the testimonies conform to a loose standard format with regards to the introduction and the conclusion, the main body of the testimony is the exclusive creation of the individual member. The testimonies

are extempore speeches and are usually accompanied by shouts of praises to the Lord, hallelujahs, and at times emotional bursts of crying. A cultural element worth noting is the incessant words of encouragements from the audience for the speaker as well as the Lord. Words such as "Praise the Lord," and "Hallelujah," are also supplemented by cries of "Say it, Mother," "Preach, preacher, preach," "Don't hold back," "All Right, all right," "Make it plain," and other inspiring bursts. All of this sustains the speaker, builds a sense of community, as well as allows a dialogue within the congregation. It is not unusual for members to speak out their grievances about the direction the church and society is taking in their views. Thus this is a platform for social protest, too.

As noted in the previous chapter, most of the testimony givers are women. They are the most inspired participants and are visibly "moved by the Spirit." There are some times when a young man would give a testimony. At such times the Elders and the Mothers would openly express their pleasure at seeing youngsters in the church who were also willing to testify their faith. In fact testimony giving is considered almost a sacred duty and members who seldom testify are castigated indirectly by the preachers. This is seen in the words of Elder Adams who felt that the testimony service on one Sunday, was very lethargic and therefore rose up to speak. He said,

"I don't know why you come to church. But I come to praise the Lord....This church is not just for passive observers. This church is for active participation in glorifying God's name."

This castigation produced immediate results when some members rose to testify.

Speaking about the reason why testimonies are important, Mother Patterson says,

"Sometimes when you give a good testimony, it helps somebody else to believe, or maybe they are going through the same thing you went through. You tell him how the Lord brought you up, what God did for you, and they can believe that and they can accept it, that it can do the same for them. So, a testimony is very good."

Similar themes are echoed by other members when they say,

"You wouldn't know unless I told you. I would be crazy if I didn't praise Him."

Thus the desire to express the impact of God in their lives, too, forms a good reason for testimony giving.

The testimonies themselves are a public exchange of life stories revolving around the dominant theme of "the workings of the Lord in the individual lives of the church members." The main body of the testimony, usually speaks about some particular incident in the life of the member testifying. This could either be a very recent one or could refer to the major transformative experience that s/he has had in his/her life. I have listed below some of the major themes that the testimonies affirm. All these themes are brought out in the testimonies reproduced in the previous chapter by Sisters

Ethel and Hemphill.

1. That God is a Good God.

This is very clear for the members from the countless blessings which they have received in their daily lives. These could range anywhere from the chance to wake up in the morning to the fact that they were cured of some illness.

2. That God is a Merciful God

This too is very clear to the members due to the existence of ex-sinners amongst their midst, all of whom have to a large degree been able to change their way of life.

3. That one has to completely submit to God in order to know His Glory.

This theme is dwelt upon by the members by portraying those situations in their lives when they had lost all hope, and then threw themselves completely at God's mercy.

Testimonies vary in length, from three minutes, to some very long ones lasting over fifteen minutes. The longer ones are usually given by the oldest Mothers and it includes a brief history of the church. The theme explored here is that of "the way things were before and how they have changed." Such testimonies are valuable in giving direction to the church and offering a vision for the youngsters. This is also the time when the Mothers seek to instill in the younger members a deeper sense of faith and seriousness towards their God. One Sunday Mother Patterson spoke about the change that

the church had seen over the years:

"...A lot of people think that the bible is a fairy tale. But it's not. A lot of people believe through seeing. In those times just by the layin' on of hands people would receive the Holy Ghost and start speaking in tongues. And there were times when people got healed, you know they would pray for them...and their crutches and the wheelchairs were all hanging up in the church. You don't see a lot of that today...But the bible says that in the last days there will be a falling in the ways, and that's true. People don't come like they used to. And I used to tell myself. During the Depression they had to come 'cause they had to lean on God and depend on Him even for their food and for everything. And they were here and they filled the church up. And this church used to be full and sometimes at night if you didn't get here by 6:30 you wouldn't get a seat. During that time the Spirit of God was high and He was doing wonders among the people. And so sometimes the other churches would close down to come here and see what was happening. Some of them would come in and some would stand outside. And also there would be times when they didn't like it and would throw stuff at you, you know like tomatoes and rotten eggs. Just like they did when Bishop Mason first started coming. They didn't really believe him. But it is so that the Pentecostal church is the fastest growing church. It is spreading like wildfire now."

Testimonies are thus a pivotal cultural performance within the Pentecostal tradition. They are the cultural forms that allow the church members who are "saved" to publicly display their "most intimately revealed truths." This is when the faint of heart and spirit finds a loving and encouraging hand waiting to guide him/her. This is when the saved saints clothe their lives and the church with poetry born from daily life experiences. This is the time when members make calls for transformation and change. This is when the seriousness of the

Black Pentecostals towards their God is made clear to the world. This is when the listener realizes that the saint who is saved is willing to go the complete distance for his/her God.

"Reading" of the sermon

The sermon is the culminating performance in the Sunday service at the Church of Sweet Jesus. Everything members do in their daily lives, seeks its roots and inspiration from the Word of God, and the sermon is seen as the Word of God as preached by the Man of God -- the Pastor. By the time the sermon begins, the Sunday service has typically gone on for about two hours. The Pastor thus rises up to preach at a time when the congregation has expended most of its energy in the performance of the Sunday school, the testimonies and the songs -- all of which are surely physically draining, if not mentally for the members. It is most likely the waning phase of everybody's concentration powers. The thought of lunch may also be playing on the members' minds, a fact which is many times openly discussed by the Pastor or the Elders themselves. At the same time the importance of the sermon entails the Pastor to deliver a reasonably impact-making sermon. In this ambience, the sermon slowly raises its head like a coiled serpent, picks up momentum right away and reaches a crescendo towards the end, taking along with it the rejuvenated

congregation.

One of the first observations which may be made about the Pastor is that he knows each and every member of the congregation by name and to some degree personally. Pastor Matthew had been with the church for about 15 years and was held in high regard by the members. A highly disciplined man in his private life, he loved to talk about his "sinful" past and how he had not "backslided" for so many years. The Pentecostal sermon is a highly personalized one, in keeping with the nature of the other performances within the church. It is almost always an extempore one with the Pastor deciding only the verses for that day beforehand. This acts as a pivot for the sermon which keeps coming back to the chosen theme for the day. During the sermon, Pastor Matthew constantly moved up and down the dais as well as at times into the congregation. The preachers at the Church of Sweet Jesus are many times known as the Holy Rollers. Explaining the origins of this term, Mother Patterson said,

"Bishop Goodman was a wonderful man. The Lord really worked with him. He would write songs and God would give him songs. And he was a good singer. Sometimes he would just sing a song and come hurling down the pulpit and the people would just fall out under the Spirit. And that's why they call them the Holy Rollers. They say that they threw something on them or something like that. But it wasn't something. It was just the Spirit of God that was showing."

The sermon itself usually started off by introducing a real-life problematic. In this particular sermon (see chapter

two), Pastor Matthew's problematic is a familiar one -- that of the waning of seriousness in the church members. He therefore weaves the theme around his own life story and attempts to illustrate the real dangers of not being serious about commitment to God. At regular intervals he speaks about the problems with the larger community, and focusses on violence in this sermon. Throughout the sermon he interacts with the members, sometimes asking them if they were listening, at other times taunting them that their minds were far away. This brings in the members as participants and prevents the sermon from becoming a boring monologue. There is also some critique introduced at times by the Pastor regarding the office of the Pastor itself. This is sometimes expressed as,

"...This is the Temple (pointing to his heart). This (pointing to the edifice) is just the sanctuary where you congregate....From the pulpit to the saints all have the right to proclaim the Word of God....If the Lord had a woman to preach, He will commission a Mother. Proclaiming is a better Word than preaching. All can proclaim....There is no intermediary between humans and God."

The sermon is also looked upon by the members for encouragement to face the problems of real life. The Pastor does this many times by narrating success stories, or by translating the philosophies contained in the bible to the context of the church members' lives. He uses his own imagination and seeks to inspire the members through the Word.

Thus there are times when he says,

"I know I'm feeling the Holy Ghost. But I want Him to knock me out. I want Him to lead me out 'cause I can't walk....Don't look for miracles to happen in the church. They happen in your home....Don't you want the church to heal diseases? AIDS ain't got no place in here. Our mission is not to see who amongst us is better. It is to get to that dope addict, to get to that troubled boy or girl. God is just as big as you want Him to be, and just as small as you make Him to be. In these times the Holy Ghost is our greatest comforter."

Thus the sermon provides the final touch to the Sunday service and sends people on their separate ways. As each member leaves the Sunday service, s/he takes with him/her certain sentimentalities about the ethos of his/her culture. Another Sunday has passed and the same feeling is cherished -- that of the awesomeness of faith, the security of kinship, and the joyousness of self-expression. Sunday service then may be seen as an example of the highest form of activity, and could very well be what the poet and philosopher Coomaraswamy refers to when he says,

What constitutes the virtue of any action is the complete coordination of the actor. We should act according to our own nature, and when that nature is developed to its fullest stature, then what is divine attains complete manifestation (Coomaraswamy 1985:119).

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The study of culture is an ongoing process. I began the writing of this thesis with the full understanding that I was not attempting to inscribe the last word that ever needed to be said, about the culture of the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus. Even this understanding did not prepare me for the realization of just how small a portion of their lives I have been able to glimpse. Anthropologists frequently engage in what may be termed "post-factum philosophising," as opposed to "a priori philosophising." This urge to philosophise is what has brought me to some general awareness of what this thesis could mean.

In deciding the path by which to approach the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus, I chose the window which the Sunday service offered to the outsider, not because this was a novel phenomenon. On the contrary, I had grown up in India, which is home to all conceivable forms of human behavior and beliefs. There, incredible acts of faith and supra-rational phenomena are not viewed as extra-ordinary. Rather, I chose the Sunday service because of the overwhelming importance it seemed to have in the lives of the members of the church. They seemed to

build their lives around this weekly event.

In retrospect, it is this lack of novelty which the acts of speaking in tongues or dancing, screaming, crying and shouting had for me, that enabled me to go beyond the externalities of the Sunday service to what I envisaged was its substance. My fieldwork and interviews with the members allow me to state with confidence that the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus themselves, do not view any of the above mentioned activities as being out of the ordinary. Consequently, concentrating one's analysis on these phenomena necessarily misses the real import of the Sunday service. While all these activities are obviously important to the members, they conceal the vital elements of their culture. It is this that I set out to find.

The glimpse that I have had into the lives of the members of the Church of Sweet Jesus, has shown me a people whose outstanding quality seems to be their positive outlook on life. Like most ordinary people in all corners of this world, they have their share, as human beings, of life's joys and sorrows. But they are also situated in extra-ordinary conditions -- they are Black in a society where Blacks are economically, politically and culturally undervalued, and they are Pentecostals in a society that casts them as strange anomalies, at best. These ordinary people in extra-ordinary situations, pride themselves on being the friendliest church

in the world, show hospitality to all who come their way, seek to preserve their kinship ties and communal ways of sharing at a time when the larger society seems to be rapidly moving away from it, and most importantly, hold steadfastly to their faith in the goodness of humanity and God, regardless of their daily hardships.

In addition to all these qualities, they are in full realization of the natural talents which they possess, foremost among them being their musical abilities. The world's most subtle philosophies crumble to dust when wrapped between the covers of huge tomes. In the Church of Sweet Jesus, these same philosophies are brought alive through the medium of music. When the Black Pentecostal sings the spirituals, s/he is not merely making beautiful music. S/he is actually communicating spiritually with the Truth that s/he carries in his/her heart. When s/he congregates with others who see the same light which is beckoning him/her, the result is a public exchange of deeply held convictions and intimately revealed truths.

When I asked Mother Patterson what the church meant to her, she replied nonchalantly without a moment's hesitation,

"It means everything to me. It's my whole life.
That's what I live for. After I got saved, I live
for the Lord. And that is my Life."

Mother Patterson personifies the ideal within the Church of Sweet Jesus. There is no compromise. One has to go the whole

way. In such a life, there has to be complete submission in order to gain humility, complete faith in order to gain courage to live, and complete dedication in order to do an excellent job of whatever one does. Sunday service with all its intensity and dynamism, holds the appeal to its participants that this is the way to the above ideal.

Conclusion

In concluding this thesis, I am convinced about the approach which I have followed. Interpretive anthropology offers an exciting path to capture the subtleties of human cultures. Caught in the unending tensions between the sciences and the humanities, cultural anthropology as a discipline is a natural home to competing views of culture and how to approach it. Any attempt to decide in favor of one view over the others, has to involve itself with fundamental epistemological questions. In this thesis, I have taken the position of some post-modernists, regarding the heterogeneity of truth. The views that I have presented about the Church of Sweet Jesus are not conclusive. Instead they may be perceived to be the future working hypothesis for those inclined to a more functional approach.

If social research has as its final goal the application of the findings of research to the alleviation of social problems, then this study seeks to find some space in the

realm of social policy making. Race and ethnic relations within the U.S.A. are continuing problems. No amount of wishing it away as something which will cease to exist once economic equality of some sort is established, will actually solve the problem. The Pentecostal movement in the U.S.A. has long been disregarded as a social change movement due to ill-conceived ideas about their interest in this world. As a result, one excellent institution through which inner-city problems could be addressed, has been grossly neglected. The Pentecostals are a grass-roots movement. They are in contact with the criminal class, as well as the working class. In terms of the impact which they have on the African Americans in this land, they are a formidable force. They have an agenda for internal transformation as well as social transformation. It is in this specific regard that I hope this ethnography helps in clearing some of the hurdles which exist in the minds of social planners. Any work of this nature also has the obvious potential to further cross-cultural understanding at an individual level.

Finally, such an attempt, albeit amateurish, to replicate the method of Clifford Geertz, has not seen too many predecessors. All too often the enthralling works of Geertz are seen to hinge overwhelmingly on his genius. While Geertz' genius is unquestionable, it is my belief that his method offers practical approaches to doing anthropology and is hence

worthy of being attempted. I hope that this work has been a step in that direction.

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